COMMENTARY

Arab Reactions to Turkey's Regional Reengagement

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ABSTRACT *During the first years of its tenure in office, as the AK Party focused on consolidating its position domestically, Turkey's reengagement with the Arab world after decades of alienation took a largely unproblematic form. Inevitably, however, as Turkish activism deepened, conflicts of interest emerged both with other aspirants to regional influence such as Iran and Israel, and then – especially after the outbreak of the 2011 uprisings – with many Arab regimes as well. The future character of Turkey's engagement with its Arab neighbors will depend on its ability to combine an adherence to a conception of community based on Islam rather than ethnic nationalism, with a commitment to democratization both at home and regionally.*

The current map of the Middle East, and the political attitudes congruent with it, for the most part came into place with the Ottoman Empire's collapse in World War I and the rise on its ruins of new nation-states modeled on – and in many cases, by – the triumphant Western powers. Unity thus gave way to division. As that map comes under growing pressure today, the story of Turkish-Arab relations comes into view as a story of alienation and mutual rediscovery with profound implications for the future of the entire region.

For several decades after the fracturing of the Ottoman Empire, authoritarian regimes sought to inculcate in the hearts and minds of their populations the secular nationalist identity they believed provided the key to modernization and development. Individual circumstances varied, and there were noteworthy differences between Kemalism, Ba'thism, Nasserism and the other variants of this secular nationalist ideology, but they all shared the imperative of erasing the old common multicultural identity which had once bound them together, in order to make way for new nationalist identities that suppress external affiliations and internal heterogeneities with equal determination. An important part of this process of erasure was the dissemination, in government propaganda and national historiography, of

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a series of alienating tropes – on the Turkish side, of Arab ingratitude and treachery, the "dagger" struck into the back of the Ottoman Empire by the Arab Revolt during World War I, the Arab "swamp" in which countless young Turkish soldiers perished in those years; on the Arab side, of Turkish conquest and tyranny, the "yoke" that had kept the region enslaved for centuries, the oppression that had claimed the lives of so many Arab nationalists. Geopolitical and economic factors also helped this process of alienation along. The economic autarchy of the interwar years and the era of import-substituting policies that lasted until the 1980s minimized the rationale for economic interaction, while Soviet threats after 1945 pushed Turkey into a NATO security alliance that further reduced its interest in the Middle East.

By the time the AK Party won its first national elections in December 2002, however, several key variables had changed. The Soviet Union's collapse diminished Turkey's reliance on the West. Various aspects of the contemporary "globalization" wave – the transition to export-promoting economic growth, increased international mobility, almost instantaneous access to information worldwide – led among other things to renewed economic and cultural ties to neighboring countries, especially in the Middle East. As barriers came down and the power of the inward-looking nationalist paradigm weakened, there was a resurgence in competing identities at both the subnational (for example, Kurdish) and transnational (Islamic) levels – a phenomenon that intensified the Turkish polity's sensitivity to its external environment, and so further increased its need to engage with that environment.

The AK Party leaders came into office with a worldview they argued was very much in accord with these momentous transformations, presenting it as more representative politically, more liberal economically, and more inclusive culturally than the authoritarian secular-nationalist paradigm they depicted as having now become bankrupt. Because their opponents remained entrenched in key positions, particularly in the judiciary and the military, however, the implementation of their worldview would be carried out gradually, in a series of stages. The first stage, lasting roughly from the 2002 elections through 2007, was one in which the AK Party concentrated on consolidating its position and warding off a series of internal challenges, including attempts by state prosecutors to shut down the party as well as alleged coup plots by high-ranking military officers. Key aspects of foreign policy, most notably relations with Iraq and with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, remained largely under the purview of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). Although the AK Party leadership officially supported a parliamentary resolution to cooperate with the United States in opening a northern front against Iraq on 1 March 2003, for example, opposition parliamentarians backed by like-minded circles in the TAF command ensured its defeat. Ironically, the AK Party would reap the public relations benefits of Turkey's refusal to participate in a war that proved extremely unpopular throughout the Arab world. On most other fronts, the AK Party government's approach during this initial period was to pursue what Prime Minister Erdoğan's chief foreign policy advisor, Ahmet Davutoğlu, described as a "zero-problems" approach designed "to minimize external threats as much as possible so that sound reforms can be implemented at home."[1]

Following a second and even more decisive victory in the national elections of July 2007, the internal situation began to stabilize. Leaked documents allegedly detailing TAF plans to overthrow the AK Party government prompted a series of arrests and prosecutions of top officers beginning in January 2008 that ultimately seemed to purge the military leadership of its most interventionist hard-liners. Freer now to pursue their agenda more vigorously, AK Party leaders focused in this second stage (which would last until 2011) on the two most promising fronts: reconciliation with the Kurds, and distancing from Israel. The government unveiled a major initiative known as the "Kurdish Opening" in July 2009 that entailed further political and cultural reforms as well as intensified contacts with elected Kurdish leaders within Turkey. Externally, decades of Turkish policy were reversed by a rapprochement with the KRG that led to unprecedented security and economic cooperation with the northern Iraqi Kurds. If successful, these initiatives promised not only to end the PKK-led insurrection that had plagued Turkey for decades, but to transform entirely the role played by Kurds in Turkish strategic thinking: from an existential threat that could be used by enemies to infiltrate Turkey's body politic in order to weaken and divide it, to a strategic ally that could promote the projection of power and influence beyond Turkey's borders.

Relations with Israel, by contrast, underwent a dramatic decline following the Israeli assault on Gaza in late December 2008, and Erdoğan's outburst against Shimon Peres at Davos in January 2009. After Israeli troops killed nine Turkish activists on a flotilla seeking to break Israel's blockade of Gaza on 31 May 2010, bilateral cooperation and diplomatic contacts were reduced to a bare minimum. The AK Party government's increasingly outspoken stance against the perceived aggressiveness and arrogance of the Israeli leadership proved extremely popular both at home and through-

Ahmet Davutoğlu, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan and Mahmud Jibril who handles foreign affairs of Libyan Transitional National Council; pose before a meeting in Ankara on july 5, 2011.

AFP / Adem Altan

out the rest of the Middle East. A Turkish poll carried out in seven Arab countries in 2009 already showed that a weighted average of 77% of all respondents felt Turkey should play a "larger role" in the Arab world.[2] Within Turkey, a subsequent poll showed 86% of Turkish respondents holding unfavorable views of Israel, compared to just 2% with favorable views.[3] On this score as well, then, the shift in Turkish policy promised to yield significant benefits, at relatively little cost, for the AK Party's domestic and regional aspirations alike.

On all other fronts during this second, transitional, phase, however, the AK Party government continued to adhere to its "zero-problems" foreign policy as closely as possible, pursuing collaborative ventures such as free trade and visa-free agreements with most of Turkey's neighbors, and maintaining a neutral stance when conflicts such as the 2008 Georgian-Russian war broke out. It was only after their third consecutive national election victory on 12 June 2011 – when they raised their share of the total vote from 34% in 2002, and 47% in 2007, to an impressive 50% – that the AK Party leaders finally moved into the latest and most assertive stage of their foreign policy agenda. In his victory speech that night, Erdoğan declared the outcome "Sarajevo's victory as much as Istanbul's; Beirut's victory as much as Izmir's; Damascus' victory as much as Ankara's; Ramallah's, the West Bank's, Jerusalem's, Gaza's victory as much as Diyarbakır's. ... Turkey has now attained a democratic freedom that is an example for its region and the world."[4]

These words came in the context of the greatest upheaval in Arab politics in decades: the popular uprisings that broke out in early 2011 and led to the ousters of Ben Ali in Tunisia,

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Mubarak in Egypt, Saleh in Yemen, and Qaddafi in Libya before the end of the year, as well as the outbreak of a more protracted civil war in Syria. The authoritarian secular-nationalist political order appeared to be collapsing throughout the Arab world. Speaking at a gathering of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo three months later, Erdoğan hailed the revolutions, called for "more freedom, democracy and human rights," and added: "The time has come for us, who with all our different languages share the same conceptual geography and destiny, to take charge of our shared future."[5] Erdoğan's declarations reflected an accelerating convergence between the AK Party leadership's domestic and foreign agendas: overseeing a decisive transition from authoritarian secular nationalism to a regime more representative of its people's cultural and moral values, and a shift from preoccupation with the sovereignty of nation-states to an affirmation of regional unity in lands that shared a common imperial legacy. Nothing confirms this interpretation more clearly than the rhetoric surrounding the centerpiece of the AK Party's multiculturalist drive in this phase: the effort to reconcile with the Kurds.

With his domestic position more secure than ever, Erdoğan launched a new round of Turkish-Kurdish dialogue – including direct contacts between top intelligence officials and imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan – that led to a ceasefire and mutual confidence-building measures in preparation for a final settlement drive. In his declaration of the ceasefire on 21 March 2013, Öcalan denounced "Western imperialism" for dividing the "Arab, Turkish, Persian and Kurdish communities" into "nation-states and artificial borders," recalled their "common life under the banner of Islam for almost a 1000 years," and asserted that "it is time to restore to the concept of 'us' its old spirit and practice."[6] That very same day, AK Party Deputy General-Secretary Süleyman Soylu made the link between the Kurdish initiative, the Arab uprisings, and his government's broader regional goals explicit: "The third wave of democracy is very important for Turkey. ... We have been in a phase of retreat since 1699 [when the Treaty of Karlowitz marked the onset of Ottoman territorial decline]. ... [A]fter 300 years we are rising once again. There is now a Turkey that can lay claim to the lands which we dominated in the past."[7] The same link was drawn by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. In an April 2012 speech he had declared Turkey to be "a country possessing the power to determine the future; to be the vanguard of a new idea, a new regional order," and announced his government's intention "to direct the great transformation wave in the Middle East."[8] Speaking in Diyarbakır one week before Öcalan›s announcement, he elaborated further on this "new regional order," rejecting the "nationalist ideologies" with which the colonial powers had tried "to dismember us" and calling for the restoration of an "older conception" of community (*millet*) – one that didn't differentiate between "Turk and Kurd, Albanian and Bosnian." Working together, "Turks, Kurds, Albanians, Bosnians, [and] Arabs" would erase "artificially drawn maps" and "break the mold that Sykes-Picot drew for us."[9]

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The Turkish leadership's actions matched its words. As growing cooperation with the KRG increasingly bypassed the Iraqi central government – with the Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish economies becoming increasingly integrated, with plans moving ahead for direct oil exports from the KRG region to Turkey, and with Turkish officials taking to visiting northern Iraq without stopping in Baghdad first – Iraq's leaders reacted with alarm. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki accused Turkey of meddling in Iraq's internal affairs in December 2011, and of acting like a "hostile" state the following April. Hints of similar concerns surfaced elsewhere, even amid generally positive political and economic relations with Turkey. Already a year before the 2011 upheaval, anonymous Syrian officials were quoted as worrying that the northern part of their country – from Aleppo in the west (slated to be connected to Gaziantep by a planned fast train line) to Qamishli in the east (in the heart of Syrian Kurdistan) – could fall under a "Turkish sphere of influence." One said: "We hear they have Ottoman ambitions, or that they want to take this region under their umbrella. Who will let this happen? Nobody."[10] A Saudi official added: "They have the power, the history. They sometimes act as if they are running the countries. They forget themselves. If this influence is going to spread again, this is very dangerous to me as an Arab."[11] Once the Arab uprisings got underway and Turkey's leadership, again backing up its rhetoric with action, unambiguously aligned itself with the anti-regime forces, the concerns became more explicit. President Assad of Syria, for example, explained Turkey's backing for the Syrian opposition in November 2012 by saying that Erdoğan "thinks he is the new sultan of the Ottoman [sic] and he can control the region as it was during the Ottoman Empire under a new umbrella.

In his heart he thinks he is a caliph."[12] The Egyptian government installed by the military coup that ousted President Muhammad Morsi, and strongly backed by Saudi Arabia, for its part reacted to Turkish criticisms of its takeover and subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood by expelling the Turkish ambassador in November 2013. Bilateral relations have remained cool since the ascension of General Sisi to the presidency.

Many commentators have depicted these post-2011 developments as the collapse of Erdoğan's and Davutoğlu's Arab foreign policy, a turning point at which "zero problems" gave way to problems with almost all neighboring Arab states. But this interpretation obscures the fundamental consistency of a vision which from the beginning posed itself as a radical alternative to the authoritarian secular nationalism that had been the defining feature of the post-World War I political order both within Turkey and throughout the region. There is no doubt that Turkey, like the rest of the world, was taken by surprise at the sudden outbreak of the Arab upheaval, and it seems likely that the AK Party leadership had been planning to maintain its "zero problems" approach toward most Arab regimes for some time longer yet, until circumstances became more propitious, but it could not have failed to anticipate an inevitable ultimate showdown between its political agenda and the Ba'thist or Ba'thisant regimes of the Arab world. Once the issue was pressed, therefore, it is not surprising that the AK Party leadership would align itself with those Arab movements – such as the Muslim Brotherhood or al-Nahda in Tunisia – most likely to share its overall vision.

The central question all along was, and remains, the viability of that vision. Anecdotal indications of its resonance among the Arab masses – such as press reports of Turkish flags and Erdoğan's photographs being raised by demonstrators in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere during the early days of the uprisings – are reinforced by more recent polling data. While the percentage of respondents in the Middle East who favor a larger regional role for Turkey fell from 77% in 2009 to 66% in 2012 and 60% in 2013, these are still considerable majorities, especially keeping in mind that a substantial portion of the overall decline was due in large part to just two countries: Syria (33% in 2013), where polling was carried out under the distorting circumstances of a bitter civil war, and Egypt (47% in 2013, compared to 74% the year before).[13] The same is true for the question of whether Turkey offers a political model for the Arab world. While only 21% of Syrians and 42% of Egyptians replied affirmatively in 2013, most of the other Arab populations polled did so in overwhelming majorities: Tunisia (74%), Iraq (62%), Jordan (66%), Yemen (70%), and even Saudi Arabia (65%).[14]

These results suggest a number of conclusions. First, that most Arabs remain open not only to the Islam-based alternative exemplified by the AK Party, but even to Turkey

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playing a leading role in the dissemination of that alternative. The AK Party's current pro-revolutionary stance therefore still seems to be bolstering its popularity with mainstream Arab public opinion. Second, however, these results also show that secular nationalism continues to enjoy a significant constituency, fluctuating between some 30% to 50% of the populations of Arab states depending on circumstances. This electoral split parallels the situation within Turkey itself to a remarkable degree, as does the fact that sectarian and to some extent ethnic minorities tend to shy away from Sunni majoritarianism. What this means is that whereas Islam-based movements will likely continue to be dominant players in regional politics, their positions are far from guaranteed, so that missteps on their part can well lead to serious reversals – as illustrated most recently by the 2013 military coup in Egypt. Third and more generally, therefore, this picture confirms the non-viability of "zero problems" in any effective Turkish engagement with the Middle East, because its agenda is bound to encounter resistance from secularists and nationalists in every country; from conservative actors such as Saudi Arabia which view (correctly) the AK Party model as a far more realistic threat to their regimes than either Islamist radicalism of the al-Qa'ida type or secular nationalism of the Ba'thist type; and from external forces (e.g., Russia, Iran, Israel) which have their own geopolitical reasons to oppose such a consolidation of regional power.

Conclusion

Writing over 600 years ago, the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun rejoiced at the conversion to Islam of the Turkish tribes whose vigorous and uncorrupted ways he hoped would rejuvenate an empire that was decaying from within and under threat from without. Whether Turkey can play an analogous role today, whether it will be able to spearhead the transition from authoritarian nationalism to a more integrated and representative new regional order, remains to be seen. The future holds too many imponderables, too many inevitable twists and turns, to allow for confident predictions. However, two imperatives are already evident. First, any leadership that seeks to pursue such a role must adhere convincingly to the "older conception of community" Davutoğlu spoke of, otherwise its involvement in the Arab world will be viewed – and rejected – as Turkish nationalist expansionism instead of Islamic integration. Hence the critical importance of the Kurdish initiative as a bellwether of this conception's viability. Second, any such leadership must recognize that a certain balance of power between the democratic Islamist and the less numerous but still potent secular-nationalist forces in the Arab world is likely to remain (as in Turkey) a reality for the foreseeable future. Neither side will be able to simply suppress or eliminate the other. The successful management of this balance will therefore require (again, as in Turkey itself) a scrupulous commitment to the institutions, norms, and practices of democratic governance.

The story of Turkey's reengagement with the Arab world is still in its early chapters, and the formidable opposition it is already generating will require a great deal of ingenuity, prudence and discipline to counter, but one thing seems clear: after all the socio-economic, cultural and political transformations of the past few decades, there is no going back to the period of mutual disengagement and alienation.

Endnotes

1. Quote from a 2004 TV interview reproduced in Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Teoriden Pratiğe: Türk Dış Politikası Üzerine Konuşmalar* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2013), p. 162.

2. Mensur Akgün, Gökçe Perçinoğlu and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı* (Istanbul: TESEV Yayınları, 2009), p. 11. The responses for individual countries included 73% agreeing in Iraq, 78% in Egypt, 82% in Syria, and 84% in Palestine.

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9. Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Ahmet Davutoğlu'nun Diyarbakır Dicle Üniversitesinde Verdiği "Büyük Restorasyon: Kadim'den Küreselleşmeye Yeni Siyaset Anlayışımız" Konulu Konferans, 15 Mart 2013, Diyarbakır. Retrieved 30 August 2014 from MFA website, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-diyarbakir-dicle-universitesinde-verdigi-_buyuk-restorasyon_-kadim_den-kuresellesmeye-yeni.tr.mfa.

10. "Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints," *International Crisis Group (ICG) Europe Report*, No. 203 (April 7, 2010), pp. 11, 21.

11. Ibid., p. 21.

12. From an interview with the Russian television station RT, 9 November 2012, retrieved 30 August 2014, from http://rt.com/news/assad-interview-exclusive-syria-265/.

13. Mensur Akgün and Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar, *Ortadoğu'da Türkiye Algısı* (Istanbul: TESEV Yayınları, 2012, 2013), pp. 20, 21. The regional weighted averages now reflected polling in 15 Arab countries as well as Iran.

14. Ibid., p. 21.